

BAM blog

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Darrell McNeill, A Decade with BAMcafé Live



Darrell McNeill. Photo: Sally A. Foxen

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By David Hsieh

Darrell McNeill remembers the first time he walked into the Lepercq Space on the second floor of the BAM Peter Jay Sharp Building. "I came up, walked out of the elevator, turned a corner, and saw this ridiculously beautiful room—unobstructed space throughout, arched beams, glass pane windows. I said to myself, 'How wonderful it is to perform in this majestic room!'"

Fast forward to 2017. For 10 years he has been the programmer of [BAMcafé Live](#), which takes place in the Lepercq Space on selected weekend nights (official anniversary: December 4, 2016). He has brought in artists both established and up-and-coming, such as Marshall Crenshaw, Grady Tate, Kyp Malone, Graham Haynes, Hank & Cupcakes, Sasha Dobson, Jen Chapin, Gordon Chambers, Wyatt, Onaje Allen Gumbs, David Ryan Harris, Jay Rodriguez, Howard Fishman, Elliot Sharpe, Theo Bleckmann, Fred Ho, Sophia Ramos, Aabaraki, Joanna Teters, Blak Emoji, Model Decoy, Tamar-kali, Marcus Machado, Addi & Jacq, and others.

To welcome the new season of BAMcafé Live, McNeill talks about his decade of programming live music acts.

David Hsieh: What led you to BAMcafé Live?

Darrell McNeill: I've been in all sorts of music adventures and misadventures my whole life. I've done commercials, radio, TV, underground theater, producing, etc. I had done quite a bit of music journalism which led me to the Black Rock Coalition in 1995. I eventually worked my way up to director of operations, a title I still hold. I was part of the new generation of executives and we were seeking ways to build upon the foundation laid by the founders of BRC. By the mid-90s the traditional music industry had radically changed. It has become much easier for independent artists to have works recorded, published, distributed, heard. We were trying to find any DIY way to give support to artists we felt should be championed.

Around 1998—99, Stew (*Passing Strange*) was invited to perform by my predecessor Limor Tomer at BAMcafé and BRC was involved in promoting it. So I met Limor and started a conversation, which led to a BRC residency in the café during Black History Month (February 2000). Then in 2006 when she left, I was recommended for the job.

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BAMcafé Live. Photo: Mike Benigno

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DH: How does your programming continue Limor's work and how do you carve out your own path?

DM: The guidelines I was given were: We want new audiences, we want young audiences, and we want diverse audiences. My background is mostly pop, which is different from Limor's, in experimental music and performance arts. There is a full spectrum of music and I program all of it. But I'll be absolutely blunt here. The days of "If you build it, they'll come" are over. You have to find a middle ground between what you personally feel passionate about and what the public will readily accept.

DH: What are you looking for in BAMcafé Live artists?

DM: First and foremost, we need dynamic performers and performances. Look at this room [Lepercq Space]—it is huge. There's an inherent necessity for any performer to project all the way to the back of the room. They need to get it across amidst all the chaos going on over the tables and the bar in between, people coming out of the elevators, the Opera House, and the Rose Cinemas. They need to connect with the audience. You have to create a critical mass by your performances so that

everybody here buys in. Nonetheless I've seen many talented people perform in this room, unable to fully own and sell what they do to all folks who could just as easily sit, talking to their friends or swiping phones.

DH: How has the audience changed in the past 10 years?

DM: Cultural engagement is meeting people where they're at. And that has changed drastically over the years. We now live in a self-medicated culture. Nowhere is that more evident than what just happened in November. Nowhere is that more evident than what's happening everyday on the Internet. People create their own rules of engagement as to how they want to interact with culture. The Internet has literally made billions of options available. It has also closed off certain options because people make a choice not to engage with other ideas. They use the Internet to create their own force field to determine what is culture and what is not, what is intelligence and what is not, what are facts and what are not. In a self-medicated world, it becomes much more difficult for us as arts presenters to put us out there as experts. This is the longstanding challenge for us all. It is especially so for me because I deal with a public that has not paid to see the programs. Anybody can walk in and walk out if they don't like it.

DH: How do you measure the success of a show?

DM: When a show is working, you see people moving in their chairs. You see people getting up and dancing. Some people go right up in front of the stage and dance. You see people making the music part of them. They're embracing the here and now moment.

For the latest BAMcafé Live lineup, visit [our website](#).

David Hsieh is a publicity manager at BAM.

Posted by Susan at 2:25 PM

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Unknown February 1, 2017 at 9:55 PM

thank you Darrell for your supporting all of us ..we wish you many continued success!

[Reply](#)**sharon** February 2, 2017 at 12:28 PM

Darrell is amazing! Thank you for your vision and your service.

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